

# Academic Staff Practices and Challenges of Publishing: Evidence from an Ethiopian University

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## **Abstract**

This article reports on the findings of a study undertaken to establish practices and challenges to academic publishing at a higher education institution in Ethiopia. A descriptive survey design was employed and convenience and purposive sampling were used to select the sample. The data were gathered by means of a questionnaire with closed- and open-ended questions and were analysed using descriptive and thematic analysis. The results show that, despite the benefits of publishing, not all academics in the university are publishing in local and international journals due to a number of challenges. These include a lack of commitment and motivation, lack of experience and exposure to publishing, and inadequate information, knowledge and skills to access accredited journals. Academics also suffer from work overload, a lack of support from the university to publish, and challenges emanating from journals themselves. It is recommended that the university, the Ethiopian Ministry of Science and Higher Education and other relevant stakeholders should collaborate to address this situation.

**Key words:** academics, academic publishing, higher education institution, challenges, practices, university

Cet article rend compte des observations d'une enquête entreprise pour établir les pratiques et les défis de la publication académique dans un établissement d'enseignement supérieur en Éthiopie. Le type d'enquête utilisée était la conception d'enquête descriptive, et l'échantillon a été sélectionné.

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tionné en utilisant les méthodes d'échantillonnage pratique et subjectif. Les données ont été recueillies au moyen d'un questionnaire avec des questions fermées et ouvertes et ont été analysées à l'aide de méthodes d'analyse descriptives et thématiques. Les observations indiquent que, malgré les avantages qu'a la publication, ce n'est pas tous les chercheurs de l'université qui publient dans des revues locales et internationales en raison d'un certain nombre de défis. Il s'agit notamment d'un manque d'engagement et de motivation, d'un manque d'expérience et d'exposition à la publication ainsi que d'un manque de renseignement, de connaissances et de compétences insuffisantes pour accéder à des revues accréditées. Les universitaires souffrent également d'une surcharge de travail, d'un manque de soutien de la part de l'université pour publier et de défis découlant des revues elles-mêmes. Il convient de recommander que l'université, le Ministère éthiopien des sciences et de l'enseignement supérieur et d'autres parties prenantes concernées collaborent pour remédier à cette situation.

**Mots clés:** universitaires, publication académique, établissement d'enseignement supérieur, défis, pratiques, université

### Introduction

Conducting research and disseminating the output are fundamental roles of academics in higher education institutions, in addition to teaching. Research is only complete when it is published and widely disseminated or shared (Ocholla, 2007). Kapp, Albertyn, and Frick (2011) note that academics are required to disseminate new knowledge by publishing in scholarly journals. Research capacity is established through publication in academic or professional journals, books, patents, creative works, research reports (i.e., theses or dissertations), chapters in a book, and peer refereed conference papers (Ocholla, 2007; Chireshe, 2010). Publication, which is the second phase of research, takes place after the work goes through a peer review process by one or more reviewers (Amusan and Olanisini, 2011). Publishing makes one's research endeavours, findings, and ideas accessible to a wider audience within and beyond the research community (Chireshe, Oupa, and Soul, 2014; Svensson and Wood, 2006; Neave, Connor, and Crawford, 2007). If the research is not documented, this equates to it not being done. Dissemination and utilisation of research findings through seminars, symposia, workshops, newsletters, and publication is also an important means of promoting the positive impact of research on development practices (Derebssa, 2004). Furthermore, Parasuraman and Mueen Ahmed (2013) note that it is a form of documentation that can be used to advance further research.

One characteristic that distinguishes higher education institutions from other levels of education is the capacity of the academic workforce to conduct and publish research. Indeed, higher education institutions' national and international status is rooted in their research profiles, reflected in the publication and citation records of works published by their academics (Woodiwss, 2012). To achieve high-level profiles, universities strive to increase research output.

### Opportunities Attached to Academic Publishing

Academic publishing offers many opportunities to authors, the institution to which they are attached, and the wider academic community. It is the primary vehicle for the development of scientific knowledge (Ligthelm and Koekemoer, 2009, cited in Berhanu, 2018). According to Berhanu (2018) and Ocholla (2007), promotion is often tied to research output. As Derebssa (2004) aptly states, "No research, no paper, no paper, no promotion". It also enhances knowledge sharing, self-development, and the author and their discipline's reputation. Journal articles are an important feature of an academic's curriculum vitae (Neave, Connor, and Crawford, 2007) when seeking a position in another university, and they enable academics to attract research funding (Kitchin and Fuller, 2005; Olson, 2014). Furthermore, it is often a condition of service as a university's local and international ranking and quality are measured by its research output (Shumba 2010).

Despite the clear imperative to publish, in general, academics at Ethiopian universities have a poor publication record. Derebssa's (2004) case study of Addis Ababa University found that the reasons include a lack of infrastructure and equipment, academics' capacity to conduct research, the teaching workload, a lack of funding, and a poor research culture. Furthermore, a World Bank study noted that, the quality and the impact of the research produced by Ethiopian universities is very low (Salmi, Sursock, and Olefir, 2017). It is against this background that our study examined the practices and challenges to academic publishing at a higher education institution in the country.

### Scholarly Publishing in Europe, America and Africa

The literature shows that the publication record of academics in Europe and America is high compared to those in African countries. Ondari-Okemwa (2007) notes that, sub-Saharan African countries have a low scholarly publishing rate compared to both developed and developing regions. Ondari-Okemwa (2007) employed International Scientific Indexing (ISI) publication records to compare the number of publications produced across sub-Saharan Africa from 1997 to 2007 with those produced in the United

States (US) and European countries in a single year (2006). The US had more than 100,000 records of scholarly publications in 2006, while the United Kingdom produced 97,904. In contrast, South Africa was responsible for 51,738 publications from 1997 to 2007 (roughly half of those in the US in 2006), while Nigeria, Kenya, and Ethiopia had 9,540, 6,661 and 2,747 publications, respectively from 1997 to 2007 (Ondari-Okemwa, 2007). A World Bank study pointed to improved research output among sub-Saharan African countries in terms of both quality and quantity from 2003 to 2012 (Blom, Lan, and Adil, 2016), with South Africa leading the way. According to ISI records, the remaining countries in the region had very few scholarly publications in the same period.

The reason for South Africa's superior publication record is that it has established systems to encourage and enhance research productivity in higher education institutions. The country's Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) produces an annual list of accredited journals from different databases/indices, such as ISI, the International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS), Scopus, the Norwegian list, Scientific Electronic Library Online (ScieLO SA), and the DHET (South African journals). Publication in these accredited journals is generously rewarded through government subsidies to the institution to which the author is affiliated for each qualifying article (Ocholla, 2007). Subsidies are also awarded for books, chapters in books, and conference proceedings (DHET, 2015). Table 1 shows the number of accredited journals from different databases identified by the DHET for subsidy purposes.

**Table 1.** Number of Accredited Journals on Databases Identified by the South African DHET in 2018

Journal Database/Index	Number of Journals
International Scientific Indexing (ISI)	13,087
International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS)	2,628
Scopus	23,508
Norwegian list	2,050
Scientific Electronic Library Online (ScieLO SA)	68
DHET (South African journals)	279

Source: DHET (2018)

As shown in Table 2 below, the majority of the journals on the ISI are based in Europe and the US.

**Table 2.** International Scientific Indexing (ISI) Journals Accredited by the South African DHET Across Continents/Countries

Continents/Countries	Number of Journals
Europe	6,732
South and North America	5,020
Africa	83 (two from Ethiopia)
Others (Australia, Asia, ...)	1,252

Source: DHET (2018)

These statistics suggest that academics from Europe and North and South America have a better chance of publishing. Only two of the African journals were from Ethiopia in 2018. This does not mean that Ethiopian academics do not publish. There are reputable journals in different disciplines in Ethiopia that are not on the list. However, the small number of publications on the list of accredited journals is one indication of the challenges confronting academics in Ethiopian universities in meeting international standards in research and publication. Salmi, Sursock and Olefir's (2017) study confirmed that, while research capacity has improved over the years, the scientific output of Ethiopian universities is low compared to other African countries.

#### Scholarly Publishing in Ethiopian Universities

In the past decade, higher education institutions in Ethiopia have undergone substantial change and expansion. However, we argue that insufficient attention has been paid to scholarly publishing.

At the time of writing, there were 45 public universities in Ethiopia, around half of which were established before 2007. A number of these universities have their own journals. However, they do not meet international standards, as a result of which academics are reluctant to publish in them. The criteria used to register a journal on international databases are reputability, the quality of peer review, internationality, and the number of citations, among others. In South Africa, the DHET has set the following conditions to be eligible for inclusion in the list of approved journals (Ocholla, 2007; DHET, 2015):

- “The purpose of the journal must be to disseminate research results and the content must support high-level learning, teaching, and research in the relevant subject area;
- Articles accepted for publication in the journal must be peer reviewed;
- The journal must have an International Standard Serial Number (ISSN);

- The journal must have an editorial board that includes members beyond a single institution and is reflective of expertise in the relevant subject area.”

Debre Markos University, a second-generation public university in Ethiopia, was established in 2006/2007. Over the years, it has registered significant progress, especially with regard to teaching and learning (Debre Markos University, 2018). The core mission of the university is teaching and learning, research, and community service. In terms of research and publication, academic staff are expected to devote 25% of their working time to research, and the findings should be disseminated through publication in conference proceedings, periodicals, journals, and books (Debre Markos University, 2015). No research has been conducted on academic staff's research and publication practices and the challenges they face. Our study aimed to investigate the practices and challenges of scholarly/academic publishing and suggest mechanisms to enhance the publication practice of academics in the university, and in the country in general. Its objectives were:

- To assess the practice of academic publication at Debre Markos University;
- To identify the challenges that academics confront in publishing.

## Materials and Methods

### Design

A descriptive survey research design was adopted to describe and interpret the data collected from different colleges in the university. According to David and Sutton (2004), surveys are usually used to solicit participants' opinions or views on a phenomenon.

### Participants

The university is comprised of five colleges, three institutes, and two schools. Four colleges and one institute were included in the study based on the assumption that academics in these colleges had more teaching and research experience.

A total of 142 instructors, researchers, postgraduate and community service coordinators from each college, research officers, and a director participated in the study. Convenience sampling was used to select instructors from the target colleges and institute, with purposive sampling employed to select research officers, research coordinators from each college, and the university's research director. According to Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018), convenience sampling involves choosing accessible individuals who are available at the time of data collection, to serve as respondents.

Those ranked as lecturers and above were included in the study, with assistant lecturers (first-degree holders) not included because, unlike their more senior counterparts, the university's rules do not require them to conduct research and publish articles (Debre Markos University, 2012, 2015).

### Instrumentation

Self-administered questionnaires with closed- and open-ended questions were used to collect the data. The closed-ended questions were Likert types, with five options ranging from strongly disagree to agree. Published articles uploaded on the university website from 2011 to 2018 were also used as a data source even though there was no assurance that all articles published by academics are posted.

### Data Collection Procedure

The data was collected after refining the questionnaire via a pilot study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

### Data Analysis

The data from the closed-ended questions was quantitatively analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences version 20, to generate descriptive statistics. The data is presented in table form. The open-ended questions were analysed and presented thematically.

## Results and Discussion

### Demographic characteristics

As noted previously, instructors, research and community service coordinators at colleges, and the research and publication director and officers participated in the study. Nearly 30% (29.6%; n=42) were from Social Sciences and Humanities, 15.5% (n=22) Education and Behavioural Science, 24.6% (n=35) Natural and Computational Science, 16.2% (n=23) Health Sciences, and 14.1% (n=20) Agriculture and Natural Resources. In terms of educational status, 78.2% (n=111) of the participants hold MA/MSc degrees, and 21.8% (n=31) have PhDs. The results show that 8.5% (n=12) of the participants had less than two years' teaching experience, 24.6% (n=35) three to five years, and 66.9% (n=95) more than six years' teaching experience. Regarding their role at the university in addition to teaching, 78.9% (n=112) played no additional role, 21(14.8%) were heads of department or an officer, and 6.3% (n=9) were college deans and directors. Table 3 presents the responses on training related to publication.

**Table 3.** Training Related to Publication

	Response	f	%
Have you received training on article publication?	Yes	29	20.4
	No	113	79.6
Would you be interested in participating if publication training was organised?	Yes	137	96.5
	No	5	3.5

f = frequency, % = percent

**Table 4.** Publication Practice

Variable	Response	f	%
Have you published?	Yes	89	62.7
	No	52	36.6
How many publication/s do you have?	Number of instructors	Number of publications	
	16	1	
	21	2	
	20	3	
	10	4	
	5	5	
	8	6	
	3	8	
	1	11	
	1	13	
	1	15	
	1	17	
	1	18	
1	20		
Type of publications	Journal article	74	
	Book chapter	4	
	Review paper	8	
	Conference proceedings	3	
Do you have a research paper which has not yet been published?	Yes	110	84
	No	21	16
Do you have information on accredited and non-accredited journals?	Yes	70	54.7
	No	58	45.3

Only 20.4% (n=29) of the participants had received training relating to publication. Almost all (96.5%, n=137) said they would be interested in such training if it were offered. This points to a lack of access to training in relation to publication. As Ganesh and Indradevi (2015) note, training has the specific goals of improving one's knowledge, skills and capacity, capability, performance, and productivity.

#### Publication Related Practices

The participants' responses on their publication practice are presented in Table 4.

Academics are expected to publish manuscripts in the form of journal articles, books, chapters in a book and conference proceedings to upgrade their profile and that of the university. More than half of the participants (62.7%, n=89) had published manuscripts whether in local or international journals, accredited or otherwise, while 36.6% (n=52) had not. However, their publication record was generally limited. Only six had between 11 and 20 publications, while 16 academics had only one; 21 two; 20 three; 10 four, and 16 between five and eight publications. Their publications comprised of journal articles (74), chapters in a book (four), review articles (eight), and conference proceedings (three).

Eighty-four percent of the academics (n=110) had research papers that had not yet been published. Only 16% (n=21) reported no research output. The table shows that 54.7% (n=70) confirmed that they had information about accredited and non-accredited journals. Overall, 62.7% of the academics had been published. However, the number of articles they published is insignificant. Overall, 15 instructors had published a total 27 articles in non-accredited journals, and the rest were published in accredited journals.

In responding to the open-ended question regarding their publication practices, lecturers acknowledged that they generally exhibit poor practice. One said, "I have three research manuscripts that I have done collaboratively with my colleagues but not published till now due to the poor publishing experience that we have."

The publication practice of instructors across colleges is shown in Table 5. All the instructors (100%) from the College of Health Sciences who participated in the study had publication practice.

**Table 5:** Publication Practice of the Academics Across Colleges

College/Institute	Number of instructors that participated	Number of instructors who had publications	%
Social Science and Humanities	42	14	33.3
Agriculture and Natural Resources	20	19	95
Natural and Computational Science	35	21	60
Health Sciences	23	23	100
Education and Behavioural Science	22	12	54.5
Total	142	89	62.7

### Challenges Confronting Academics in Publishing

**Table 6:** Challenges Confronting Academics/Researchers in Publishing

Items	Level of agreement					
	Agree or Strongly Agree		Undecided		Disagree or Strongly Disagree	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Inadequate skills to access accredited journals	61	44.9	31	22.8	44	32.4
Lack of commitment	40	35.3	26	19.1	62	45.6
Lack of experience	74	54.4	20	14.7	42	30.9
Lack of research output ready for publication	40	29.4	26	19.1	70	51.5
Lack of time to organise manuscript/article on the basis of the journal guidelines due to high teaching load	69	50.7	24	17.6	43	31.6
Lack of time to organise articles on the basis of the journal guidelines due to additional office work	68	50.0	24	17.6	44	32.4
Inability to afford the publication fee	92	67.6	20	14.7	24	17.6
The transaction process (getting hard currency) is difficult	85	62.5	25	18.4	26	19.1
There is no push in the university to publish articles	79	58.1	30	22.1	27	19.9
No support from the university to publish articles (like training, finance)	108	79.4	16	11.8	12	8.8
The low value/weight given to published articles for promotion	48	35.3	34	25.0	54	39.7

The analysis of the university's website and research and publication link confirmed that staff from Health Sciences had more publications than their colleagues in other colleges. However, most of the articles were not published in journals on the South African DHET's 2018 list of accredited publications. The research, postgraduate, and community service coordinators in the Health Sciences College indicated that its staff are highly committed to conducting research, presenting papers at conferences, and publishing articles in local and international journals.

Table 6 illustrates that inadequate skills to access accredited journals, and a lack of commitment, and lack of experience are major challenges confronting academics in publishing articles, with 44.9% (n=61), 35.5% (n=40) and 54.4% (n=74) of the respondents in agreement with these statements, respectively. Forty (29.4 %) agreed that a lack of research output ready for publication was also a challenge. Further constraints identified included a lack of time to organise manuscripts/articles on the basis of the journal guidelines due to a high teaching load (50.7%; n=69) and additional office work (50%; n=68).

Inability to afford the publication fee (67.6%; n=92) and the transaction process (obtaining hard currency) (62.5%; n=85) were identified as major challenges, as was a lack of push from the university to publish (58.1%; n=79).

The majority (79.4%; n=108) of the respondents agreed that there is no support from the university to publish articles (such as training and financing), while 35.3% (n=48) identified the low value/weight given to published articles for promotion.

The challenges fall into three categories. The first emanates from the academics/researchers themselves, the second from the institution, and the third is external.

*Lack of experience and exposure to publication:* These were the main challenges that lecturers raised in response to the open-ended questions. Around 25% (36/142) stated that having no experience in publishing is a major challenge when writing and publishing manuscripts in journals. A lecturer wrote, "The main problem in publication is lack of experience in changing a research manuscript to a journal article as per the diverse needs of the publishers. It is so tiresome and time taking." The research and publication coordinators in a college noted that since most members of staff are young, lack of experience is a challenge.

*Lack of commitment and motivation:* The academics indicated they lack commitment and motivation to do research and publish articles. A lecturer commented that, "Lack of commitment and motivation to prepare for publication" is a challenge, while a university research officer confirmed that, "Lack of commitment of the university academics is a challenge." This is in line with

Berhanu's (2018) study in Ethiopia. Commitment is a critical element of every activity. As Dorenkamp (n.d.) notes, academics typically have strong affective commitment to their profession. If they are highly committed to academia, they have a strong desire to remain in the profession and to pursue its goals and values, such as intellectual honesty and searching for the truth. However, the current study found that instructors lacked commitment to research and publication, with 35.5% agreeing with this statement. Kornhaber et al. (2016) and Murray (2009) note that lack of motivation and interest are barriers to writing a manuscript for publication.

*Inadequate knowledge and skills to access journals:* A lack of information on accredited journals, and inadequate skills and knowledge to locate, access, and publish in accredited journals (reputable and indexed in a known database) was cited by 27% (38/142) of the respondents. Berhanu (2018) found that, limited language competence to produce a publishable article and a lack of research skills are major challenges confronted by academics face in publishing. Oermann and Hays (2011) also identified lack of understanding of how to write for publication as a barrier. Chireshe, Oupa, and Soul (2014) and Murray (2009) concur that mastering writing skills is one of the key factors in successful publication. Academics also face challenges in accessing accredited journals. The instructors, research directors, officers and research coordinators at different colleges noted that there is no system which distinguishes accredited journals from non-accredited/predatory journals. Pho and Tran (2016) found that a lack of writing skills and difficulty in identifying appropriate journals were major hurdles.

*Academic (teaching-learning) workload:* A heavy teaching workload leaves little time for academics to produce articles for publication. Most of their time is devoted to teaching students in class, marking examination papers and assignments, and providing feedback. One of the lecturers remarked: *"Most of the time we are busy with the usual ... routine teaching-learning process; we have no time to do research and publish it in international journals"*. Academics are highly engaged in teaching and their course load. Oermann and Hays (2011), Ness, Duffy, McCallum, and Price (2014), and Pho and Tran (2016) also identify this issue as a barrier to writing articles for publication. Murray (2009) and Edwards (2002) add that administrative work adds to the burden.

*Lack of information on accredited and non-accredited journals:* A lecturer noted that, *"There is no clear-cut criteria/parameter that the University in particular and the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, in general, informs about accredited journals"*. Most of the lecturers agreed that they had little or no information on accredited and non-accredited journals.

*Inability to afford the publication fee:* International journals' publication fees are usually in US Dollars and Euros, making them unaffordable for

most of the respondents. In addition, the transaction/payment process is difficult, due to the shortage of hard currency in Ethiopia. A lecturer stated that, *"I cannot afford the journal publication fee and the transaction process is not easy to pay the money in our country ... this discourages researchers to conduct research and publish the output in international journals."*

*Lack of support from the university:* The lecturers stated that no support in the form of training on how to publish articles in international journals is provided by the university, nor is any assistance forthcoming with the publication fee. In addition, there are no incentives or rewards, which could at least to cover the publication fee. In general, the academics felt that support from the university is negligible. Poor Internet connections and lack of exposure were also identified as challenges. Kornhaber et al. (2016) observe that limited collegial support and differences in writing and engagement with publishers are barriers to writing a manuscript for publication. Lack of funding is an obstacle to local and international publication (Pho and Tran, 2016), and finding appropriate journals also causes considerable difficulty, especially accredited and international journals. In their responses to the open-ended questions, many of the respondents reported that no training was provided to staff on publishing their research.

*Challenges relating to journals:* The lecturers identified the different challenges they encounter in publishing their articles in international journals, including the long waiting period for reviewers' comments or recommendations, the high tendency for negative responses from reviewers, the complexity of different journals' formats/guidelines, and the long time it takes to get accepted and published in international journals.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

The study's findings offer insight into Ethiopian academics' publication practices and challenges. Despite the benefits of publishing, not all academics in the university are publishing manuscripts in local and international journals. The challenges include a lack of commitment and motivation to do research and publish the output (in local and international journals), lack of experience and exposure to publication, and inadequate information, knowledge, and skills to access accredited journals. In addition, academics suffer from a work/teaching overload, cannot afford publication fees for international publications, lack support from the university to publish articles (such as publication related training and funding of publication costs) and confront problems that emanate from the journals themselves. Based on these findings, the following recommendations are made to academic staff, the university and the Ministry of Science and Higher Education:

- The Ministry should establish a system to develop academics' publication practices;
- A system should be established to identify accredited journals (local and international) and make them accessible to the academic community;
- Academic staff should take up training opportunities and publish their research output following the different journals' guidelines by browsing Internet sources.
- University research and publication offices should support academic staff by providing training and hosting experienced researchers with good publication records from other institutions (local and overseas);
- The university should advise, support and give direction to postgraduate students to publish their research in local or international journals for the benefit of the students, instructors (advisors) and the university.

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